ABC photos

ABC's 'Trial of Lee Harvey Oswald': Revisionism and showbiz

Recipe for Paranoia

By many other names, what is today called a "docu-drama" has been around ever since William Shakespeare did his semi-fictional number on Julius Caesar. But the sudden burst of these slickly confected hybrids of fact and fancy on television—with its highly susceptible mass audience—is shaping up as the most controversial video development since Archie Bunker brought bigotry to the sitcom. Viewers of ABC were still trying to sort out truth from supposition in "Washington: Behind Closed Doors" earlier this month when the network hit them with "Young Joe: The Forgotten Kennedy." That docu-drama blithely fleshed out what little is known about John F. Kennedy's older brother with enough Freudian assumptions to make even psychohistorians uneasy. And last weekend, NBC presented a dramatized portrait of Caryl Chessman, the California sex criminal who was executed in 1960, strongly suggesting that Chessman was denied a fair trial.

Now ABC has applied the docu-drama technique to an even more explosive subject. On this Friday and Sunday, ABC will broadcast "The Trial of Lee Harvey Oswald," a four-hour film dealing with what might have happened had JFK's accused assassin lived to face prosecution. It's an engrossing notion, but what emerges is a case study of the dangers of TV's pervasive new form. The docu-drama's creators maintain that they are offering America a salutary catharsis, an opportunity to discover whether Oswald would have been found guilty or innocent—and whether he acted alone or as part of a conspiracy. Yet by indiscriminately blending hard evidence with pure conjecture, ABC must stand accused of irresponsibility in the first degree. The verdict here is guilty as charged.

From inconsistencies in the Warren Commission Report, plus all manner of subsequent speculations, ABC has fashioned what amounts to a brief for the conspiracy theory. The two-part movie begins with a chilling re-enactment of the Dallas assassination, filmed at its actual Dealey Plaza locale. It goes on to trace the life of Oswald—portrayed as alternately arrogant and vulnerable by look-alike John Pleshette—in both America and Russia, and culminates in a lengthy trial pitting prosecutor Ben Gazzara against defense counsel Lorne Greene.

Gazzara voices his doubts right from the start. "A poor shlub who couldn't even hold a job is capable of planning a Presidential assassination?" he incredulously asks an aide. But a phone call from none other than "President Johnson" advises him not to try to look for a conspiracy because "there's no water in that well . . . and it wouldn't be good for the country." Sighs Gazzara: "I've just been told what to think." So have the viewers. There is not a shred of evidence that Johnson ever intruded in the assassination investigation. So much for establishing a factually objective tone.

Who Are 'They'? Now it is left to Greene to perforate the prosecution's one-man, one-gun case. As Gazzara looks on with sheepish admiration, Oswald's attorney reduces the state's witnesses to stammering cretins while Mother Oswald mutters from the audience, "They put my son up to it." Just who are "they"? In the manner of Perry Mason, Greene sets out to find out—and therein lies the show's cheapest shot. Conspiracy buffs have relentlessly tried to pin JFK's murder on both pro- and anti-Castro Cubans, the FBI, the CIA and even the Mafia. As Greene pursues leads to each of these links, the film keeps switching to dramatized flashback scenes in which Oswald is shown secretly meeting with a variety of sinister-looking figures. Obviously, someone is trying to recruit him for something.

Back in the present, Oswald's defense team reads conspiracy into the most nebulous of clues. One of their potential witnesses is found dead after being stabbed with an ice pick. "That sounds like the Mob," concludes Greene's assistant. A second witness expires in an automobile crash. "*Another* accident?" bellows Greene. The assistant then returns with an elaborate theory involving a CIA-Mafia connection motivated by the haziest of mutual interests. By the time Oswald himself takes the stand to deny his guilt, the audience has been conditioned to select a conspiracy to fit almost any prejudice.

A Fatal Covenant: Indeed, virtually every ingredient in this production seems subtly designed to inject yet another dose of paranoia into the national psyche. Ersatz TV newsreels of the trial keep cutting in and out, apparently to lend an aura of journalistic credibility to what is anything but journalism. Gazzara's prosecutor registers as one of those hyperambitious legal hustlers who get ahead by knowing when to look the other way. The choice of Lorne Greene to play the wise old defense owl is almost guaranteed to make his myriad "Bonanza" fans accept whatever he avuncularly suggests. And Pleshette's Oswald ultimately emerges as the classic patsy. The film presents him as a man so determined t

Pleshette as Oswald, Malone as Marina

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